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AUTHOR Gross, Harriet Engel; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A study compared commuter and Merchant Marine families with traditional households in order to separate effects related to living apart from those related to the career status (single vs. dual) of families. During the study researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 50 wives and 30 husbands representing 58 Merchant Marine families of whom 22 were couples. Next, they compared these data with data obtained from an earlier study of 26 wives and 17 husbands representing 28 marriages in which the husband commutes to work. Although significant demographic differences in educational attainment, employment status of wives, and the presence of children and important differences in duration and pattern of separation distinguish the two groups, researchers found three common consequences of the couples' separations. These involved changes in the couples' relationships, wives' relative personal freedom and social confinement, and the feeling that they were leading deviant lifestyles. Based on these data, researchers concluded that separation cannot be interpreted independent of career status, because the latter implies different structural relations among couples as well as different resources available to wives that affect how separation is viewed. (MN)

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MERCHANT MARINE AND COMMUTER FAMILIES:
A COMPARISON OF COUPLES WHO LIVE APART

Harriet Engel Gross, Christine Thomas, and
Marie Van Gemert

Governors State University

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ABSTRACT

A comparison of commuter and Merchant Marine's families was undertaken in order to separate effects related to living apart from those related to the career (single vs. dual) status of families. Data reported here from interviews with 50 wives and 30 husbands (Merchant Marines) were compared with responses from an earlier study of commuters. Although important differences in duration and pattern of separation distinguish the two groups we found three common consequences having to do with (1) changes in the couple's relationship, (2) wives relative personal freedom and social confinement, and (3) the imputation of a deviant lifestyle. We also found "adjustment" consequences peculiar to Merchant Marines which were related to separation pattern and structural differences between them and commuters. We concluded that separation cannot be interpreted independent of career status, because the latter implies different structural relations among couples as well as different resources available to wives which effect how separation is viewed.

MERCHANT MARINE AND COMMUTER FAMILIES: A COMPARISON OF
CONSEQUENCES ASSOCIATED WITH LIVING APART

More than any other factor, women's increasing labor force visibility takes responsibility for creating recent research interest in linkages of work and family life.¹ The Subtle Revolution (about women's wage-earning work, Smith, 1979) carried with it a plethora of books and articles which reveal just how much wife's work became the catalyst for research interest in the effect of work on family life. (See for example, Pepitone-Rockwell, 1980; Feinstein, 1979; and Golden, 1978.) Our own earlier research with commuter couples--dual-career couples who live apart in service to the career requirements of each--clearly sprang from an interest in this seemingly "new" family responsive to women's work-related needs. (See Gerstel and Gross, 1982 for a classification scheme of couples who live apart, a discussion of historical and contemporary examples, and a review of commuter family research.) Our research suggested that although commuters may have chosen to live apart to allow wives to fulfill career aspirations, this choice was not without costs to wives and husbands alike. But understanding how to interpret the costs and benefits they detailed required that we separate effects related to living apart from those related to the fact that both commuters were simultaneously pursuing careers. Accordingly, we set out to study single-career families who live apart--Merchant Marine families. The results reported in this paper compare commuter and Merchant Marine families.

Research about families who separate in circumstances similar to those of Merchant Marines has looked at separation effects in military families; (McCubbin, et al., 1976) among wives of husbands who work on oil rigs (Morrice and Taylor, 1978) and on submarines (Isay, 1968 and Pearlman, 1970).² Morrice, a psychiatrist in Scotland, coined the term "Intermittent Husband Syndrome" to describe effects he found among a clinical population of wives whose husbands work on oil rigs in the North Atlantic. Though interesting as case studies of women under enough stress from separation to present themselves for psychiatric counseling, both his and Pearlman's (also a clinical population) studies do not allow a view of separated family life from the point of view of wives not so troubled or from the point of view of their husbands. Findings from studies of military wives appear to be more useful to our analysis of Merchant Marine wives.

A review of this research shows that (1) the social status of military wives is ambiguous (revolving around issues of married vs. singleness), (2) that military wives became increasingly independent as they learn to live without their husbands, and (3) that adjustment to separation may be a developmental task which becomes easier with the passage of time (McCubbin, et al., 1976). As we shall see, these findings are similar to what we found for Merchant Marine and commuter wives. But the fact that Merchant Marine families are civilian--an important distinction between them and military families--limits the usefulness of further comparisons. As civilians, Merchant Marine families are not embedded in the tightly focused communities that surround military bases, nor is there as distinctive a sub-culture to which they are oriented.³

With this brief review of relevant literature, let us turn to a comparison of commuter and Merchant Marine families. The first part of our analysis deals with consequences attributable to living apart, consequences we found among both groups. The second section deals with consequences found only among Merchant Marine families.

Sample and Methodology

The data, in-depth interviews from non-random referral samples (N=43: 26 wives; 17 husbands, representing 28 marriages of whom 15 are couples) is described in Gross (1980a). The Merchant Marine data also came from in-depth interviews with 50 wives and 30 husbands representing 58 families, of whom 22 are couples. The husbands sail as licensed (United States Merchant Marines) personnel on commercial fleets on the Great Lakes.

Respondents live in Great Lakes port cities in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio. About half of the interviews were conducted in the homes of respondents in the Chicago metropolitan and Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin areas; the other half were conducted during the annual meeting of the International Shipmasters Association, held in Duluth, Minnesota in February, 1982. During the three days of these meetings, a team of four interviewers (the principle investigator and three trained research assistants) interviewed husbands and wives who had come to Duluth to attend this convention. Most of the men in this sample are officers in the two main departments that differentiate a commercial ship's personnel: the deck department, which includes (in rank order) captains, mates, and deckhands; the engineering department which includes (in rank order) chief engineers, assistant engineers, oilers, etc.

Three significant demographic characteristics distinguish commuters from Merchant Marines. Since both commuter husbands and wives hold high prestige business or professional jobs, their educational achievements are commensurately high (90% have completed at least some graduate work). This is not true of sailing husbands, two-thirds of whom are high school graduates or less. Among sailing wives, one-quarter did not complete high school and among the remainder only 5 (9%) are college graduates. However, family income levels are generally higher for sailing families, despite the fact that commuters are two-, and sailing, one-income families. This is because of the high incomes enjoyed by most Merchant Marine families. While 80% of sailing families had incomes greater than \$30,000 this was true of only about 40% of commuter families.

The second significant distinction stems from the fact that all commuter wives work in career occupations (or are in graduate programs preparing to do so). Only a fifth of sailing wives were employed outside the home and only 2 of these 12 wives worked full-time (a teacher and a nurse. These were also the only two jobs that had formal educational requirements.)

The third demographic distinction is presence of children. Only 14% of Merchant Marine families were childless (since these were the youngest in the sample, they probably will not remain so) while half of the commuter couples had no children.

Age and years married did not vary greatly, although sailing husbands and wives were somewhat older and have been married somewhat longer. Mean age for commuter husbands was 38; for sailing husbands, 47; for commuter wives, 36; and for sailing wives, 39. More than half (55%) of sailing

spouses have been married for 15 years or longer (with a range of 3 months to 47 years); the mean years married for commuters was 12 years.

Beyond these demographic differences another important distinction between these two groups of couples who live apart has to do with the duration (how long they have been separating) and the pattern (how often they reunite and for how long) of their separation. With respect to duration, most commuters had been living apart for a relatively short time (three fifths for less than 18 months). This contrasts with the vast majority (95%) of sailing families who have been living this way since they were married and most have been married longer than 15 years. (A little more than half of these husbands have been sailing more than 20 years.)

About half of commuters lived apart during the week and reunited each week-end, about 10% lived apart from one week to a month and about 40% for longer than a month. Among those separated for longer than a month, reunions could last from several days to several months (e.g., the summer academic term). Sailing families have lived apart longer (duration) and when they reunite during the sailing season most of them have less time together (pattern). To understand their pattern of separation it is necessary to review briefly the history of sailing schedules and recent changes in their working patterns.

As recently as from three to six years ago before unions negotiated vacation time, sailors worked the whole sailing season which for commercial sailing fleets on the Great Lakes lasted from the beginning of March to the end of January. This meant that husbands lived away from their families for at least nine months. Except for occasional time off that coincided with being in ports near their homes they returned to their homes (some did

not have even this possibility) only for the winter lay-off when the lakes are not navigable (from January to the end of March). Just in the last few years, this pattern has changed somewhat with the institution of Family Leaves. In principle, these leaves allow men to work a set period (e.g., 60 to 70 days, depending on the company and the union) followed by a vacation period (20 to 30 days). However, in practice, many men still do not take the vacations allowed them and all but the youngest in our sample (who came in under the new plans) worked a substantial part of their careers under the more restrictive conditions. That they are not paid for vacation time is a major reason for reluctance to use their allotments.

Seventeen percent of these men now take the vacations allowed them (working a set pattern "on" and "off"); 28 percent can take alternate vacations but only take one--usually 30 days--during the summer; 29 percent have sporadic schedules with vacation time as little as one week during the sailing season to as much as one week off for every two weeks of work. (For most in this category, the pattern is 30 "on" and 14 "off"); 26 percent do not take any extended vacation during the season. This summary reveals the variability of the patterns of reuniting. (We were unable to locate differences in consequences associated with these variations.) Thus, even today, most of these men do not live at home for most of the nine month sailing season. However, most (69%) do sail into ports near their homes at least every two weeks during the sailing season. But since they are still working when the boat is in port, only those who get close enough to spend the time they are not on duty (a matter of hours) with their wives, can go home. Usually their wives meet them at the docks. Another possibility

for husband/wife contact is time spent by wives (and sometimes older children) on board ship. Officer's wives (depending on the company) join their husbands on board for one or two short trips (3 or 4 days) during the sailing season. And, of course, they are in phone contact throughout the sailing season. (Husbands call wives when they are in port. Wives can, but rarely do, call their husbands shore-to-ship because this is an open line which precludes private conversation.)

What these conditions mean is that most men in this sample have lived apart from their families for much longer than is true of commuters (only recently have they had the option to do otherwise) and most do not spend as much time with their families during the long sailing season (although they are together during the winter months).

COMPUTER AND SAILING FAMILIES: VARIATION IN SHARED
CONSEQUENCES OF LIVING APART

Although important differences in the duration and pattern of separation do distinguish Merchant Marine responses from those we found among commuters, there were at least three consequences of living apart common to both. These have to do with (1) changes in the couple's relationship, (2) wives relative personal freedom and social confinement, and (3) the imputation of a deviant lifestyle.

Emotional Distance

When cultural prescriptions which define marriage presume both spousal cohabitation and psychological intimacy, couples who live apart--by definition--deviate from the first presumption; this, in turn, may jeopardize their ability to meet the other. This was the point of an article which interpreted commuter couples' awareness of psychological distance in their relationships (Gross, 1980b). They reported that they felt "weird," "strange," or "awkward" when they reunited after periods of living away from each other.

The analysis of these responses argued that such feelings were the result of a sense of jeopardy to the order-constructing quality of marriage as it is defined in our culture. Marital interaction, the day-to-day sharing of the minutiae of life, validates the roles and selves that spouses use to orient and motivate their behavior--to give it "meaning." This meaning-giving function of marriage, I argued, results in part from the fact that living together allows couples to share two life-ordering dimensions. They share space and they organize their daily time commitments around the requirements of each other's schedule. Shared time and space

help produce the order-constructing quality of marriage, the subjective expression of which is feeling that the relationship is "normal," "comfortable," and "unselfconscious."

Sailing husbands and wives recognize the same emotional nuances in their reaction to each other that commuter couples mentioned--responses that signal jeopardy to the order-constructing quality of their marriages. They too use words like "stranger" to describe the distance they feel in responding to their mates.

It feels like he's a stranger, like I don't know him, as if something might have happened to change him a little bit, and I just don't know what happened or anything.

and

I can't put my finger on what the feeling is but for the first few minutes, it's kind of strange. You know like you know him, but yet you kind of hold back. You know him so well, but yet you don't think that's maybe the same person. I just can't explain all that. It's a strange feeling.

And a husband put it this way:

It's like meeting a new woman each time.

This awareness of the psychological distance between them is caught graphically by the wife who said:

It's like yelling across a cavern, at first. You say, "Hi sweetie, should we go to the movies?" "Oh, sure." But you feel just like you get back together one step at a time. It's like you're walking down the street and you're on one side, and he's on the other and you kind'a come together at the corner.

As with commuters, the separation of sailing families means that husbands and wives do not arrange their daily regimens around each other's time constraints (e.g., morning departure, meals, evening activities, etc.) nor do they occupy a common space where each comes

to experience the other's presence as "natural." As a consequence when they do return to living together, the self-consciousness they feel about each other's presence is disturbing. It requires what they routinely refer to as "adjustments necessary" to return the relationship to its "taken for granted" quality.

In explaining why "it's difficult to adjust," one wife said:

Well, like he has a different schedule than I do at home. I don't eat three meals a day when he's gone and it's very different...it's like you have to start all over again. I have to keep reminding myself that we are a couple now and it's not just me.

Frequently the consciousness of needing to reorient to the spouses' presence amounts to sleep disturbance. "I'm not used to sleeping with someone," was a common response for husbands and wives. Or awareness could amount to sensing the inappropriateness of being troubled by a spouses' felt presence. In talking about the adjustments she feels she has to make, a wife recalls, a conversation with her husband:

I said, "I feel like when the phone rings you're there listening to me," and he has a perfect right to. It's his house.

As we shall see in a later section of this paper, what sailing families must adjust to includes more than threats to the naturalness of their relationship because they do not consistently experience joined time lines or share common space. But this "adjustment" to missing spatial and temporal moorings parallels the experience of commuters. This is the part of "adjusting," I would argue, that reflects reactions to the breach in the sense of normalcy (or order-constructing quality) they refer to as "strange."

When you're not used to having another person around, it's sort of a strange feeling for the first couple of days. It goes away.

Heightened Communication

For a distinct sub-set of sailing spouses (about a third of wives and a little less than a quarter of husbands) there is another facet to separated living's effect of inducing emotional distance in the marital relationship. As do some of the commuters, these sailing spouses believe that living apart prevents the boredom or dullness which they see as a characteristic of co-resident marriages. Like the commuters who recognized this characteristic of their marriages, they speak of a sense of freshness and spontaneity, of heightened communication, rediscovery and interest in each other when they reunite.

I think that you probably appreciate each other more than others. It's not like the same face day after day.

Many used the imagery conjured up by the term "honeymoon" to characterize this element of their relationships. The frequent reference to this term during the interviews themselves and in informal conversations with groups of sailing couples suggests that this has become a conventional response. When they want to tel' each other, or an interested party, a benefit their marriages have that other marriages lack, it is this honeymoon quality they mention.

It's always like a honeymoon. It's always new-- your relationship with each other.

and

Every time they come home, it's like a honeymoon-- really. I mean it's a grand time. If anybody is having trouble with their husbands, send them away. When they come back, they're so glad to see her. I always say it's just like a honeymoon when they come home.

and

I think it helps marriages, because a lot of them whose husbands were home, aren't married, they're divorced. This way, when they come home, it's a honeymoon and I think it's better for marriages.

The other side, then, of the loss of naturalness which comes from interlocking time and space orientations, is the relationship's ability to ward off routinization and pallor.

Really it's kind of neat, this deal of come in the door and, "Oh, gee honey, I'm so glad to see you." He doesn't come in and sit down and pick up a paper and put his feet up and ignore me.

As is true of commuters, a cost perceived by sailing families from one perspective may be a benefit perceived from another. This double-edged quality of the consequences of living apart crops up again and again.

Private Autonomy and Social Isolation

The complex of advantages and disadvantages these spouses continually balance, comes through clearly in their frequent references to loneliness, on the one hand, and independence, on the other. While living apart causes understandable loneliness, it also increases competency, especially in those sex-typed activities which would be assumed by the partner if they lived together (e.g., a wife fixing a flat tire; a husband sewing on a button). However, more than the self-reliance resulting from doing things they might not otherwise do, both sailing and commuter wives also recognize a more generalized sense of independence--some even suggesting that they had become "too" independent. By this, sailing wives meant either that they resented how much responsibility they had to bear alone or they meant they feared their independence would create problems when

their husbands returned to resume authority in the home. (In this respect they are like military wives, see McCubbin, et al., 1976.) The awareness that living apart made them "stronger" was even more pronounced among sailing wives because of the longer period they are required to assume primary responsibility for household management and child care. Also, sailing wives, given their lower educational levels and working class backgrounds, may have anticipated more traditional marriages and, therefore, may have expected to be dependent wives.⁴ Many recalled earlier times when they were not independent but said they had developed this quality because they had to.

I think it's probably made me far more independent than I wanted to be. I would've loved to be a clinging vine and be taken care of. Maybe because I've never done that. But, yes, it forced me into being a stronger person, I suppose.

Wives' independence had repercussions for sailing marriages which commuter marriages did not evidence: a realignment of the husband-wife control relationship. As we shall see below where we discuss adjustments peculiar to sailing families, sailing husbands respond differently to their wives' independence than commuting husbands do.

Commuting spouses and sailing wives recognized another response to living apart from one's mate that set them off from their friends and neighbors. In both groups, this was referred to as feeling like a "fifth wheel." By this they meant that as married persons without a mate to accompany them to social events, their status was problematic (see McCubbin, et al., 1976 for similar findings about military wives). They felt others did not include them in events as often as they might if their husbands were home. Or they admitted that they excluded themselves,

on the expectation that they would be uncomfortable at couple-oriented gatherings.

You're a single and you aren't a single.
You belong and you don't belong.

and

The people we know accept the fact that Joe is gone. And occasionally we will make plans as a group to do something and they'll say, "Come on, go anyway, Rose." Well, I hesitate because I usually feel like a fifth wheel, but they don't make me feel that way, I'm uncomfortable. To walk into a group of strangers, where it's couples-- there I'm very uncomfortable. But, what I mean is I don't do it. In fact, I think I'm more apt to exclude myself in a big hurry. "No I'd rather not because Joe isn't here."

So living alone produces loneliness, but at the same time, increases competency and independence. The autonomy and independence that living apart encourages are advantages prized particularly by both sets of women. But, the cost to the gain in personal autonomy is the social isolation that results from diminished opportunities to attend events and celebrate occasions in a "coupled" world.

"Being Different"

A fourth consequence of living apart has to do with responses others make to those who live this way. Both families realize they are thought of as "different" and both must defend themselves from the imputation of being deviant.

But this is more of an issue for sailing families than commuters, despite the fact that commuter marriages, at first glance, appear to depart more from norm; about conventional marriage. Commuters do have to defend themselves from concern for the reason they live separately, i.e., their mutual recognition of the wife's career aspirations. For

sailing families, the reason for separation--the husband's breadwinning function--is not the problem. Rather it is the length of the separation which elicits skepticism. Commuting couples are not misunderstood when they account for their living apart. Their explanation might occasion a response suggesting the listener would not "put up with" or "get away with" such an arrangement, but for the most part, commuters deflect such negative imputations without much effort. In general, they were not particularly concerned with others' reactions to their lifestyle. (Mothers who left young children with their fathers elicited the most censure.) Selective involvement with similarly professionally-oriented friends and peers shielded them from hostile responses, because such friends shared their ideas about career constraints and the legitimacy of having to separate in the service of career aspirations.

But sailing families frequently mentioned lack of comprehension when they tried to explain their lifestyle. The discrepancy from conventional ideas about how much time together "being married" implies is, in part, what made them both be regarded as, and themselves "feel," different.

You try to explain the time they spend on the boat
and the time they spend off, and they just kind of
look at you like, "Oh, really?"

What they have to contend with in this respect comes through vividly in the following account given by a wife who tells of the problems she had when she appeared as a witness in a friend's divorce proceedings and attempted to explain her husband's work.

Well, that was a trick and a half to try and explain
to them what this marine business is actually like.
It was just unbelievable. You had to start from the

very beginning and tell 'em how these boats run seven days a week. There is no time off, there's no night, no day; their time just rolls all together. There's no time off for a holiday because somebody is getting married. It goes on and on and on. It was unreal trying to explain this lifestyle. They could not comprehend the fact that these men are gone, period. If Christmas comes and goes and you're out on the lake, that's just too bad. It was terribly hard trying to explain that to them. It's almost like you can't believe it unless you do it.

The fact that many commuters (at least half in the Gross, 1980a and Gerstel, 1977 samples) were apart during the week, but reunited on week-ends, is pertinent here. At least for these commuters, the rhythm of their lives--work during the week, leisure with spouses on the week-ends--is not very different from the typical pattern of most couples--especially other dual-career families. And even for those commuters apart longer--very few stayed apart for more than a month, when they would reunite for at least a week-end and sometimes longer. Commuters also had something else to mitigate the effect of deviance imputations. They could comfort and protect themselves from the inquiries of others with the recognition (they all held to) that the basis of their "deviance" was more alterable. Because they all believed they would eventually return to living together, they could define themselves as "temporary deviants" in a way unavailable to sailing couples who realized that separations were a fact of life for them.

Many sailing spouses said they had "given up" trying to explain their pattern of separating and regrouping, because the topic occasioned so much incredulousness. They preferred not to have to contend with the deviant implication this response signaled, than defend the logistics of their time together--which many agreed made them "strange."

It is a strange, strange life.

and

We are different, you know.

A small group of sailing spouses handled this dimension of "being different" by denying the legitimacy of the charge and recasting their time with each other in a more favorable light. Like commuters in this respect, they speak of "quality time" by which they mean that the time they had together was better utilized and more appreciated. Since husbands/fathers were home "all day," they argued that "on balance" they had "as much time" or "more time" with their families. Here they noted the many vacations they could take as a family; the husband/father's ability to spend "all his time" on winter sports activities with the children; and the fact that other occupations, like doctors and truck drivers, kept men away from their families "more."

So while commuters had to contend with reactions to a reason for separating that is non-traditional--deference to the wife's career aspirations--sailing families had to account for a more unusual, that is discrepant from typical, separating/reuniting pattern than even most husband's occupational constraints call for. Also, sailing families could less successfully deflect these responses, because most sailing spouses measured their own marriages with their detractor's yardstick--agreeing that they were indeed "different."

But in addition, sailing families had more trouble defending themselves from deviant imputations because of other elements of social disapproval tied-up with the public's image of sailors. Most husbands

and wives acknowledged that the general image of sailing still retains elements of a way of life long since supplanted because of better working conditions and a different population (at least among commercial ships on the Great Lakes). They lamented the fact that the general population knows so little about commercial sailing as an occupation and, therefore, tends to view sailors based on outmoded conditions. The old-fashioned stereotype of the sailor as "rowdy," unstable, and generally unsavory no longer applies, they argue. Here they note with pride the long hours of study and examinations sailors must pass to advance in their careers, and the modern, clean, automated and complex machinery with which they work. They note their stable family lives and their relatively high incomes as evidence of the fact that the stereotype is inappropriate to their circumstances as licensed personnel and officers in the Merchant Marines.

It is partly this additional negative stereotype, partly the longer separations they endure and partly their own acknowledgement that indeed their family life is "different" that makes them speak to the issue of deviance with more emotion than commuters. Although those to whom it applies take comfort in the prestige accorded to the role of Captain, and all recognize the advantages of their generally high incomes, sailing families were clearly more defensive about their way of life and the implications of living apart than were commuters.

SAILING FAMILIES: CONSEQUENCES OF LIVING APART
NOT FOUND AMONG COMMUTERS

Common responses from both sailing and commuter families (with some variations that we noted) were the focus of the previous section. Now we turn to responses found among sailing families, but not among commuters. The one phrase more than any other that captures what distinguishes the accounts of sailing husbands and wives from commuters is the former's emphasis on "necessary adjustments." Because the period of time sailing spouses do not live together during the year is typically longer, sailing spouses describe adjustment problems largely absent from the accounts of commuters. These include adjustment to the consequences of the husband's particular pattern of coming and going, adjusting to his attempts to resume authority in the home when he returns, and adjusting to being both "bored" and "overworked" at the same time.

The Permanence of Change

A whole set of problems unique to sailing spouses results from the unpredictable schedules they contend with during the sailing season and the predictably long winter reunions they face when it ends. As we have seen during the season, the boats these men sail on may return to a port in the home areas as frequently as every six or seven days. Husbands particularly, but most wives as well, expect that the women will either meet their husbands at the dock or "be home" if their husbands can get there. Their time together may be just a few hours (rarely as long as twelve, typically 5 or 6 hours) and the husband may arrive in the middle of the night or mid-afternoon. What this means for the wives' lives is that they cannot have commitments which might supercede the need to be

available to their husbands. It is principally for this reason that husbands and wives agree that the woman cannot hold jobs, at least not demanding jobs that would prevent them from being with their husbands. Understandably then, the few (one-fifth) that do hold jobs work part-time (only 2 out of the 12 work full-time). The jobs they hold are typically low-skilled and low-paying, governed by "arrangements" and "understandings" with their employers that allow them to be with their husbands when they come in. The majority, however, do not work and several recount having given up a job because "it didn't work out."

The indeterminacy of the husband's schedule during the year means that wives make plans and arrangements with the understanding that the ship's arrival may cancel them. A few wives said they went on with their plans, but most argue that "it is only right" that they be available to their husbands for the "few hours" they are home. For the most part, they accept the circumstances--the loneliness and the constraint; they accept that the rhythms of their lives are predicated on their husband's work. But they do so with the recognition that such acceptance developed gradually, not without discomfort. The terms they use, "coping," "adjusting," "getting used to," all suggest a process, a gradual understanding that developed over time. (Here again, there is a comparison to military wives. See McCubbin, et al., 1976). In response to a question about changes over time, one wife's response catches well these themes of loneliness, indeterminacy, schedule-juggling, and the need to cope.

I guess maybe you'd call it habit, being alone, and never knowing when he's coming home, "cause you don't know and we just have to cope with it." You'd be straight up a wall if you didn't. I'm sure that if you let it bother you--the first years that we were married, "My God, what is this crazy schedule?" Then all of a sudden, I realized there wasn't any schedule.

But adjusting to his absence and intermittent presence is only part of the story. When the sailing season ends and he comes home on a full-time basis additional adjustments are necessary. Typically when their husbands return home for the winter, they leave a time-bounded routine (life on board ship is calibrated in alternating watches of four hours "on" and eight hours "off") and highly structured environment. By contrast, coming home means entering an unstructured expanse of time and responsibilities. But this is not so for the wives whose time continues to be dictated by the same responsibilities and obligations that consume her daily life when her husband is away. In fact, her responsibilities may increase when he returns because the husband's presence means more scheduled meals and more involved house-keeping demands. Just as commuter wives mention, geographic separation seems to bring a transformation of needs with wives reporting that they are less concerned about household responsibilities when their husbands are away (Gerstel and Gross, 1982). Apparently with husbands gone, these wives think of themselves outside their role as wife, which implies a reduction of household duties and standards. But when the husband returns, the wife's standards about herself in relationship as a wife return too, and she feels more of a responsibility to provide a real meal instead of a quick snack and more obligation to keep a neat family home.

The problem then of the husband's comparative lack of structured activities is most acute during this winter time-off period. Some families use this time to travel (this may be complicated by school-age children's schedules); a few husbands take other jobs during this period,

but for most, the winter is a time for family members to readjust to each other in the home. What complicates this readjustment is the fact the couple is thrown together on a twenty-four hour basis. After having lived separately without needing to take each other into account (at least in terms of day-to-day living), they must now reorient to each other's fulltime presence. The sheer presence of the husband plus his lack of structured activities while the wife's activities continue (and even increase) creates tension.

That's another thing that makes it so hard. He's either gone completely, never here, or he's here constantly. Well, you know, in the beginning he'd say, "Well, I'm coming home. I'll go home for the winter and I'm going to relax, that's it." Well, after a week, we were driving each other nuts. You can't go from working constantly, day in and day out without a day off and then come home and sit down and do absolutely nothing. It's just not a good thing, just like retiring and doing absolutely nothing. Because too much time together is as bad as not enough.

This "feast or famine" aspect is the crux of the matter. Wives use this phrase and others such as "all or nothing," "all of a sudden," or "he's on vacation, I'm not," to describe why it is that the winter's reunion is not unconditionally pleasant.

I feel that he's away from me enough, but there's times when I don't want him around twenty-four hours a day.

and

For one thing, he's not home that much for any length of time and when he's off for the winter, he is off the whole time. So he is home morning, noon, and night. I see him all day, so it's all or nothing.

While most wives speak to this concern, only a few husbands also recognize this response to their sudden entry into the home.

I come home and try to function like I always have. I would imagine it was harder for my wife to adjust to me being there. She was used to running things her way, while I'm gone for eight months of the year. Then, all of a sudden, I'm there again, you know. She has to make an adjustment to me. Just to have a man around the house again--all of a sudden.

Mostly, however, husbands see this as a problem focused on their attempts to resume control in the household, which from the wife's point of view is distinct from the sheer impact of the husband's continuous presence. Though the husband quoted above catches the idea of his wife's need to contend with another person on the scene, he also implies that the problem is not just his being there, but his attempt to control the routine of the household. He goes on--

Oh, yeah, there'd be difficult times. I'd tell her to do something and she'd say, "Well, who made the decisions while you were away?" She'd come out and tell me it was an adjustment for her to make and I realize it.

As we shall see in the next section, the husband's attempt to resume directorship compounds adjustment to his continuous presence, but this is a separate issue for the women.

Here, let us summarize the wives' adjustment concerns attached to the long period of their husband's absence, which is sprinkled with intermittent short visits and to their husband's full-time return to the home. Her life is circumscribed by the demands of his work in both periods: her schedule revolves around his comings and goings during the year; and the months at home with him necessitate reactions and accommodations to his presence. What complicates their ability to sort out their feelings about his presence is that while they sense these sources

of frustration attached to his re-entry into their lives, they also know how much they want him to be home. This combination of pluses and minuses is not well understood by either party. Wives seem perplexed and embarrassed by the admission that in some ways it's easier when he is away, that they may even look forward to his return to duty. The following account of a conversation a wife recalls having had with her husband illustrates this complex of ambivalent feelings.

"Your vacation in the last couple of years has been literally a hell," I said. "I almost wanted to laugh on the way back (from the airport). And then I feel so guilty the minute you're on that plane. I feel so bad. It's like I'm afraid I'm going to say the wrong thing, do the wrong thing." It must be like being on ice all the time. And he can't understand it.

Understanding the constraints their husband's work exerts on their lives makes it easier to see why they emphasize the freedoms they do have. As we have seen, what they mean by freedom is personal autonomy, ability to control the events of their daily schedules without interference. No small wonder they prize this aspect when so much of the rest of their lives is hemmed in by restrictions they are loathe to regard as such.

Much of what prevents full realization of the restrictions they talk about has to do with the fact that they accept a view of marriage which frowns on wives complaining about the "breadwinner's" efforts. In their view, a husband's work obligations "ought to" take precedence, since they are well aware of the benefits they get from a relatively high standard of living. ("Money" was the most frequent response given to a question about the "best aspect" of this lifestyle and many told

of relatives and neighbors--reference groups--who earned considerably less.) While a few do complain bitterly about the effects of his work, most cannot justify calling too much attention to its negative aspects without compensatory statements about its benefits. A keen sense of the monetary advantages they enjoy plus their traditional views about marriage (that wives should adjust to husbands' requirements) blunt the criticisms they acknowledge. For the most part, they seem reasonably successful in their efforts to deny severe personal repercussions. These women as a group do not describe lives of desperation, but strain exists and most allude to it, even if, on balance, they seem to have "adjusted."

This whole life is just a bunch of adjustments.
Adjustments to his being gone; adjustments to
his being home.

Renegotiating Spousal and Parental Control

We saw above that like commuter wives, sailing wives feel more independent as a result of living away from their husbands. But for sailing wives, much more so than for commuting wives, this increased independence is just the trait that often makes "adjustments" necessary when their husbands return home. The very quality which both recognize as the sine qua non for a wife's successful adaptation to living without her husband can make it more difficult for her to live with him.

I'm very independent. And, of course, he is too.
So there's a conflict over who is going to be boss--
that type of thing.

The adjustments--her accommodation to his desire to resume a controlling role in family affairs and his inability to easily accept her expectation to keep at least a part of the control she has been used to exercising--call for considerable marital negotiation. Both husbands and wives

acknowledge this, but husbands usually focus on their resumption of control vis-a-vis the children. Wives see the issues around the father's functions, but also recognize their own problems with having to take another adult's wishes into account in decisions they previously made alone.

The group of wives who voiced the most concerns about this problem had something in common: they were all wives of captains. Apparently, the fact that captains have so much authority and status on the ship and that they exercise so much control there, spills over into their domestic life. When we grouped wives into those who could be ranked as high (21%) moderate (62%) or low (17%) in satisfaction with the lifestyle, we found that all of the wives in the low group were captains' wives. These women, as a group, give the most poignant accounts of the lifestyle's restrictions. They are the wives who use the most vivid imagery to describe their situation. They say they feel as if they are "in a prison without bars," "a cage," "a coffin," or as below, "in a jar with the lid screwed on."

I think they want you to change and let them do all the thinking and taking care of everything. But, it's like I said one time, "You can't be smart nine months and stupid three." I said, "You can't become a robot at the end of nine months and let somebody put you in a jar and screw the lid down and then emerge when they leave and start taking over everything again."

Again, here the structure of their relationship and its accompanying assumptions are pertinent. For commuting husbands and wives, having an egalitarian marriage was a striking factor they listed among those responsible for their decision to live apart. In fact, older husbands

viewed the arrangement as an attempt to rectify a previous imbalance, when the husband's career had taken precedence over the wife's needs and desires. "It's her turn now," was a common response they gave to justify living away from their wives. But sailing spouses expect husband's needs to take priority. Both sailing husbands and wives told how the husband had tried other jobs, but had come back to sailing because of its satisfactions. Often they said, "He loves his work" or the husbands said, "I really love sailing" to explain why it was they lived this way. This consideration, plus the knowledge that their family's support came from the husband's work gave it priority.

Though sailing wives may chafe at their husband's attempt to control them, they accept, in principle, the idea of the husband's basic prerogatives. And because they cannot deny legitimacy to the idea of husband's dominance, they are conflicted about their resentment of it.

It's his work you know. He's not out there
just fooling around.

"Too Much" and "Too Little" to Do

The final response to be discussed here to living apart, we found among sailing wives but not among commuters stems from the different objectives and goals that direct each group's lives. The sailing women are principally wives and mothers. They fill their days with tasks related to the performance of functions associated with these two roles. Commuter wives, by definition, are working women usually professionals whose demanding work-related obligations set their daily schedules. In contrast to sailing wives who tell of a need "to keep busy," commuter wives "are busy," a difference in their own way of telling about their lives we found revealing. Over and over again, sailing wives reported

strategies they developed through the years to combat boredom, a nearly universal issue. These wives all address it. Either they explain the mechanisms they use to avoid boredom or they complain about its effects. "I've learned to keep busy," is a persistent refrain that echoes through these interviews.

Keeping busy, that's the name of the game. I think I spend most of my time working to use up time.

At the same time, they also speak of being overburdened, "over busy" with responsibilities and obligations attendant to running a household and raising children--for all practical purposes--singlehandedly. Given their situations, these are not inconsistent responses. They are, in fact, both "under" and "over" involved.

I think the hardest thing is to be totally responsible for everything and making sure things get taken care of, you know, all the things.

Especially when the children are young, but also when they are older, these women's lives focus on the activities of their children. In part, the children's comings and goings are a welcome filler to what would otherwise be a glaring void. But managing the children's schedules is also a wearying responsibility. Thus, they can speak of "too much" and "too little" to do at the same time.

Commuter parents who lived with their children (recall that only half had children living at home, whereas only 14% of sailing families were childless) also acknowledged feeling like single parents. But again, because of the longer period of separation, nearly all sailing wives said they had at times felt like "single parents." While much of this has to do with increased activities involving children because

their husbands are not around to take over (e.g., with discipline, driving, attending outings, etc.) there is also the psychological burden of making decisions alone.

Just somebody to say you've made the right decision, even if he says, "Sure honey." It's just so nice to know. Or if the kids are out in the car, there's somebody besides you who's sharing the concern.

The unevenness of their activity levels--sometimes "too little" to do, sometimes "too much"--is compounded by their isolation from coupled activities we spoke of earlier. Not feeling free to involve themselves fully in the activities of friends and neighbors, and without work colleagues, loneliness accentuates the boredom and vice versa. In sum, although many of these women work hard at "keeping busy" and appear reasonably successful at doing so, being required to distinguishes them from commuter wives as a group.

Before concluding, we should point out that in terms of these consequences as well as others, sailing wives show remarkable resilience. They deal with what they must and they "make a family" by sheer dint of their considerable efforts. No doubt, because they know so well just how arduous this task is, they resent all the more, the implication that theirs are not "real" families.

CONCLUSIONS

The logic of our comparison of two different types of families who live apart flowed from a concern with separating effects of living apart, per se, from the effects of the career status, single (Merchant Marine) vs. dual (commuters) career of these families. What we found was that only with respect to one set of common consequences--changes in the couple's emotional responses to each other--could we distinguish separation consequences from those having to do with career status. This is because we found from our comparison that each group's interpretation of the effects of living apart depends in large part on the defining distinction between the two groups. That is, a couple's career status implies very different structural relations (traditional vs. egalitarian) as well as different resources (education, careers, income) available to wives in each marriage.

These structural differences mean that single and dual career couples who live apart experience their separation from different vantage points. Moreover, differences between the two groups in duration and pattern of separation also limit the possibility of talking about separation consequences as such. We found then that both variables, separation and career status, need further refinement and their interaction needs to be taken into account to explain consequences of living apart. To put this another way, a fuller understanding of living apart as an independent variable appears uninterpretable without (1) refining what we mean by separation and concurrently (2) considering the effect of other intervening (structure of the relationship) variables.

What does seem to be a common response to separation, as such, for both types of marriage are changes in the couples emotional responses to each other. To understand these changes we must view both types of marriage from the point of view of what co-resident marriage provides. Living together brings intimacies and with them the routinization of the relationship. This "taken for granted" quality of marriage derives in part from the sharing of time (interconnected schedules) and space. But along with this routinization and the welcomed consequences that living together brings, comes a certain measure of boredom and dullness. In contrast, living apart threatens the "naturalness" of the relationship and spouses register "inappropriate" (as intimates) reactions to each other. Yet, by living apart couple's rediscover each other, though at the cost of daily intimacies. Thus, both types of marital separation reveal what is perhaps, "...an irreconcilable dilemma of marriage" (Gerstal and Gross, 1982). Sparks rarely fly from slow, even-burning fires.

Beyond such changes in the couple's relationship, further interpretation of even the common consequences shared by commuters and Merchant Marines needs to take into account how the structure of the relationship between spouses colors the meanings they attach to such consequences. Thus, while wives in both groups become more independent as a result of living apart, this independence means different things to each group of women and their husbands. When Merchant Marines say that they value their independence they are really speaking more about personal autonomy--the ability to arrange their daily schedules--than the freedom to do

whatever they want. They do value the increase in choices they have as well, but they are more circumspect about the benefits of such freedom. Several Merchant Marine wives, but no commuters, used the phrase "too independent" to qualify how they felt about this change in their lives. Because they accept and expect control over their lives to come from sources beyond themselves, they are as wary of the logical extension of the habit of deciding things on their own as they are pleased by it. They know their husbands will come home expecting to resume responsibilities they assume in his absence. Thus, there is a tentativeness about the celebration of their "independence" that commuter wives do not communicate. Commuter wives are more able to enjoy their relative independence because they expect women and wives to be more independent and they know their husbands are more likely to share this expectation. Because Merchant Marine husbands and wives accept a view of family life which at least prescriptively allows husband's dominance, departures from wifely subordination are troublesome. On the other hand, the fact that commuter husbands and wives accept the legitimacy of more egalitarian norms about their respective roles and relationship means that these wives are more able to enjoy changes in their lives that represent departures from traditional expectations about marriage. To be sure, they too wrestle with the discrepancy between their more egalitarian expectations and norms about traditional marriage, because traditional marriage is a compelling standard, a reference point, from which to gauge their own marriages. But though both use traditional marriages as a reference point, there is a difference

in doing so, in as much as the one group (Merchant Marines) accepts the legitimacy of this normative complex, while the other (commuters) cannot yet reject it entirely.

So too, with the remaining common consequences, relative isolation and deviant imputations, differences in the structural positions of these wives (more subordinate in Merchant Marine, more egalitarian in commuter marriages) means they respond to these consequences differently. Relative subordination for Merchant Marine wives, as we have seen, means that their husbands' work requirements constrain their lives--most importantly in so far as they are able to pursue interests of their own which would keep them from being available whenever their husbands can meet them (which we saw was unpredictable). This means that most do not have jobs, let alone careers which make work a "central life interest." So while most are resourceful and energetic about their efforts to "keep busy" their accounts lack the zest commuter wives convey when they talk of how their work absorbs them and functions as a hedge against the loneliness and isolation they would feel without it. Whether Merchant Marines' wives, at this point in their lives, would want careers (probably they would not for a host of reasons) is not the point. It still seems clear that work mitigates loneliness and isolation among commuters. For sailing wives there is no similarly absorbing counterpart. In these families children and domestic routine are full-time responsibilities (just because these wives are alone so much). But in the nature of things, as children grow, these responsibilities wane, leaving sailing wives without either careers or equally personally satisfying outlets to turn to. On the other hand, accepting that the

breadwinner's priorities supercede their own is a view which makes it easier for sailing wives to adjust.

In terms of fending off deviant imputations, Merchant Marine wives fare less well than commuter wives, too. Because sailing wives accept traditional marriage as a standard, and because their separation pattern is more aberrant, they are more defensive about imputations that they are not "normal" families. Apparently, the challenge to their "idea of family" is greater than it is for commuters, for whom traditional norms (co-residence unless the husband's work requires separation) are non-binding. They know their family life rejects traditional norms about the family, but their "idea of family" not only allows for separate living, it requires it.

Moreover, as we have seen, commuters, though concerned about deviant imputations, tended to neutralize them with greater dispatch. They accomplished this by shielding themselves more effectively from censoring views and by defining their deviance as "temporary." Thus, it is ironic that just that group of wives who are better able to protect themselves from the ravages of living apart are those less likely to have to do so for as long.

Turning to responses peculiar to Merchant Marines we see that despite difficulties of duration and pattern of separation, these couples manage to maintain stable ties and enduring relationships. Indeed, for the most part, they manage to do so quite well. Unpredictable reunions followed by continuous co-presence, unsettle the routines wives develop--making what was useful when alone, troublesome when together. Yet expecting their husbands' work and childrens' demands to constrain their lives,

they mute their complaints and celebrate their "adjustments." To do otherwise, given the structure of their relationships, would invite emotional disaster. They need the family they create, as badly as it needs them.

And so do commuters. In this sense, both group's efforts to create "family" in the face of conditions which threaten its stability, testify to the importance of "the idea of family" aside from whatever structures do or do not make it possible. Both groups, wanting a family, devote considerable energies to making it happen. So the map in their heads is as fundamental as the distance or proximity which cements or threatens it.

Finally, let us say that our effort to specify work-related linkages of family separation (see Gerstel and Gross, 1982) has been useful inasmuch as it has helped us see the effects of separation in context. Significantly, our analysis has confirmed that separation in the service of careers is only "new" when both spouses' careers require it. Further, our analysis has revealed how fundamental are the structural and ideological underpinnings that make family what it "is" (and therefore means), to those of us who live in them.

1. See Kohn for a discussion of four major foci of research on work which he agrees has not, until recently, focused on family/work corrections. To the extent family is considered at all in the research, he reviews it is "...regarded as a competition for the time and energy of the worker or as a potential source of difficulty on the job" (1980:68). See also Piotrkowski (1978) for a discussion of the "Myth of Separate Worlds" that has kept social scientists as well as the public from concentrating on connections between work and family life.
2. McCubbin, et al., 1980, in a decade review of family stress research attempts to link occupationally-related family separations to other stress literature. Sherar (1978) is also a study of Merchant Marine but it is about sea faring (not the Great Lakes) unlicensed personnel but is largely a study of the individual, and not the families of Merchant Marines.
3. See Montalvo (1976) for a discussion of the distinctive sub-culture and close-knit network of social relationships characteristic of military families.
4. We use the terms "traditional" and "egalitarian" marriage in this paper to reflect the same distinction Harding (1981) encompasses using the terms "hierarchical" and "egalitarian" (Merchant Marines are more "hierarchical" or "traditional"; commuters more "egalitarian"). Her discussion is a useful explication of the different values and strategies about forming and maintaining a family these two types imply. She summarizes differences between the two world views, in terms of such issues as division of labor and power distribution between spouses; nature of decision-making; spousal autonomy; role of children in the family; definition, evaluation, and assignment of provider role; expectations about the wife's working, etc.

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